



## INFOTECH

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# Be productive with online services

**R**ecessions, depressions and the economy are clearly the big issues being discussed around the water cooler. With all the talk about bailouts and stimulus plans, I figure the only workable solution for the small business is to increase productivity and more fully respond to ever-changing customer needs. This month, I've collected a couple of online services to help lighten your workload.

### Microsoft Mesh | [www.mesh.com](http://www.mesh.com)

Good business ideas come in the strangest places, and having the time to work on them all is always a challenge. When I got my first laptop, I thought I had this problem solved. Then I realized the critical files I needed were on my desktop computer at work. Does this sound familiar?

You need Microsoft Mesh. It's a simple utility that syncs your critical business files among your home, desktop and laptop computers. It even stores them in a secure location on the Internet for easy access when you are away from the computers you normally use. With Mesh, you don't need to worry about the physical location of your files. It allows you to work wherever you are.

As an added bonus, Mesh lets you take remote

control of your machines. Need to run a special program that is only available on your work machine? No problem, just connect remotely and work as easily as if you were in the office. And best of all, it's free for the first 5GB.

### UserVoice | [www.uservoice.com](http://www.uservoice.com)

Even the newest MBA graduate will tell you that the secret to a successful business lies in your understanding of the needs of your customers. Gaining that valuable insight has never been easier: UserVoice delivers a new online experience for your customers to provide instant feedback, suggest improvements to your business, and vote on new business ideas that would help them the most.

There are several benefits from this service that I find compelling:

- ▶ **The price tag just can't be beat.** They have a free offering to get started.
- ▶ **There is no software to install.** To get started, all you need to do is provide a feedback link on your Web site. They do the rest.
- ▶ **It's easy to use.** Your customers will love having the ability to be heard, and will become more invested in your success, having made suggestions.
- ▶ **Knowing what your customers need allows you to focus on exactly what they value.** That's a huge productivity booster.

There's one caveat to this panacea of customer input: You need to be engaged in the process. Your customers will expect a two-way dialogue. For best results, be an active participant. Respond with genuine concern and authenticity, instead of the traditional corporate voice. Customers want to be heard. Be there to listen.

Both of these services put forward real, tangible benefits that can be implemented in less than an hour. And with free plans available, the return on investment is immediate. In these uncertain economic times, getting closer to your customers and being able to implement their ideas faster are the keys to success.

The only **workable solution for the small business** is to increase productivity and more fully respond to ever-changing **customer needs**.